

The Hitchin Society AGM, 18 March 2013 Planning Notes, 2012 – 2013

Two long-running soap operas continue to dominate the Hitchin agenda, as they have for years. In the best traditions of the genre, each episode ends with a cliff-hanger, and our productions are no exception.

At the time of writing, here are the stories so far:

The Churchgate Saga

In September 2012 Simons wrote to NHDC requesting an extension to their contract, originally signed on 19th March 2010 and therefore coming up to its third anniversary on 19th March 2013. This is 'the first cut-off date', when either party can extend or terminate the contract. At a Cabinet meeting on 1st November 2012, a cabinet member required of officers a 'compelling reason' for extending the contract, and a special council meeting was arranged for 31st January 2013 for councillors to vote on whether or not to grant such an extension.

Once again, the community groups came together and worked as one on various activities: writing letters to all councillors, arranging or supporting a public meeting, setting up an online petition and devising speeches to be given at the start of the council meeting. And at that meeting councillors voted by a large margin (29 to 7 with 5 abstentions) **not** to extend Simons' contract, unless there should be material changes to circumstances, which means that, although any such changes are most unlikely, we cannot be **absolutely** sure of our ground until 19th March, the day after our AGM.

Once that date is safely passed, we can think about where we go from here. For instance, NHDC officers have proposed various options, and Hammersmatch, the leaseholders of the present Churchgate Centre, have some ideas for a more modest extension and refurbishment of the Centre. So we wait to see what will happen next.

The Town Hall Saga

In October 2012 the Town Hall closed for the renovation and refurbishment of the Mountford Hall (as a community venue) and the other side of the building (as a district museum), with shared space between (shop, kitchen, café, etc.). A planning application for changes to the building was approved in March 2011; this application included the demolition of 14 Brand Street (the shop next door to the Town Hall) to provide an entrance and foyer to the museum.

Since then, however, 15 Brand Street, the shop next door, has also become available, and a much superior façade, entrance and foyer would be possible if these premises were also demolished and the space included as part of the Town Hall. A new planning application was therefore submitted and discussed by the council's Planning Control Committee on 21st February – we are very pleased that the committee accepted this proposal. Now we wait for the next stage, hoping it can begin without any further delay.

Once again, we must thank the directors of Hitchin Town Hall Ltd for all they have done, purely voluntarily, on behalf of the community, and pay tribute to their amazing level of commitment, which now stretches over years – we really do appreciate all they have done and are doing, when often things cannot have been easy for them.

Other issues in the course of the last year included:

Top Field

Since our last AGM a very real concern arose that a developer was seeking to build a large retail store on the site of the present Hitchin Town Football Club (thus threatening the vitality of our town centre) and to build new sports facilities in the Green Belt opposite Kingshott School on the Stevenage Road. We would be strongly opposed to both these proposals. NHDC has considered the environmental impact of such schemes and found them inappropriate in many ways.

No planning application has yet been submitted, but we will object strongly if or when an application appears. Meanwhile members of our committee continue to attend meetings and monitor the situation.

Former Post Office Site in Hermitage Road

This has been the subject of a Development Brief, followed by public consultation and an amended Development Brief, which was discussed and accepted by Council in February.

We, like others in the Hitchin community, are concerned that the properties adjacent to the site will not be included in the Brief, as the new development, however good, will inevitably be marred by the ugliness of its surroundings, especially the aspect onto Portmill Lane. Apparently enquiries have been made, but unfortunately the other properties are in multiple ownership, which would make it difficult, expensive and, above all, very time-consuming to include them in the Planning Brief.

Local Plan

NHDC has recently published draft documents on Housing Options and the Community Infrastructure Levy and is consulting on these until 28th March. We shall be responding to this consultation, as we did to the previous one about housing levels. In addition, representatives of the Society, along with those from the other Hitchin organisations, have already had one meeting with council officers to discuss aspects of the Local Plan.

The Orchard and Anvil Site, Nightingale Road

We have written many times over the years in response to various applications for this site, always supporting the idea of retaining the original building in any scheme and opposing demolition, mainly because of the building's character in its surroundings and its key position at one of the gateways into the town centre, but sadly we did not succeed in our efforts on this occasion, and in January this year the council decided to allow the demolition of the public house and to permit a new residential development.

Roundabout at the junction of Fishponds Road and Ickleford Road

In August 2012 HCC put in a ridiculous application to plaster this small roundabout and its wild flowers with four large advertising boards. We objected on various grounds, and thankfully the application was refused.

Luton Airport

This time last year, the airport owner and the airport operator had joined forces to put together a joint planning application, which was submitted in January this year. Once again, we have objected strongly to this scheme to alter and extend the airport. We are most concerned that roads leading to the airport through North Herts, and especially through Hitchin, will not be able to cope with the probable huge increase in traffic arising from the planned increase in flights.

We are also concerned about higher levels of aircraft noise, especially at night, and increased air pollution. Equally importantly, we objected to the fact that Luton Borough Council, the owner of the airport, should be permitted to decide this application, from which LBC stands to gain financially to a large extent – we feel it would be much more equitable and transparent if this matter were adjudicated by a Secretary of State, to whom we are also writing. The LBC consultation ended on 18th February, so we await the outcome.

Some additional thoughts on the future of Hitchin

What is happening with Hitchin Town Hall may well be unique in its scope – a council working in partnership with community groups on a project for the future benefit of both. It has probably not been easy for either side to mesh together what are presumably very different modes of working, but despite setbacks and delays, it is being done.

This eventual co-operation arose out of great public concern about NHDC's first plan for the Town Hall – a proposal to destroy the Mountford Hall's architectural integrity by dividing it horizontally with a mezzanine floor. This was a case of cultural philistinism, and immediately recognised as such by the community groups, who are knowledgeable and care passionately about Hitchin and its historical legacy.

Similarly with the Simons' Churchgate development plans, apparently embraced wholeheartedly by NHDC, but totally lacking in any sense of place or appreciation of what would be appropriate in a town like Hitchin. Again, from the first exhibition this was recognised by the community groups as unacceptable in style and scale, never mind any other shortcomings in the plans.

It seems a great shame that so much time, energy and money were expended on the original Town Hall and Churchgate projects by NHDC councillors and officers on the one hand, and by community groups and the public on the other, because of an underlying flaw in the process which means that contracts can be agreed and schemes developed before the public has any idea of what is going on.

The council officers may be the experts on finance, town planning and the associated law, but it is equally true that the public of Hitchin, and particularly its specialist groups, are the experts on their own town, its history and its aesthetics.

In the past there have been examples of joint working between the council and the community groups, so why can they not work more closely together now and in the future for the benefit of Hitchin? If the community groups were seen as partners of the council from the start of any new project, if there were no unnecessary secrecy disguised as 'commercial confidentiality', so much trouble could be avoided, so much time and effort saved on both sides. We accept that there may be some genuine issues of commercial confidentiality, but not as many as NHDC would have us believe, and a fair number of these are perceived as instances of institutional self-preservation.

Already there are more issues in the pipeline for Hitchin, and there are bound to be others as time goes on. We would like to think that 'battles' similar to those fought originally over the Town Hall and more recently over Churchgate need not and will not arise again.

Surely we can do better than that? Could we not, with a little more goodwill and mutual respect, and a little less arrogance, inflexibility and defensiveness, learn from and help each other? We wonder whether our councillors, and those from Hitchin in particular, could not do a great deal more in future to foster a closer and more open relationship between NHDC and the town's community groups.

Better relations between council officers and community groups in the past and in other districts prove that it can be done, and recently a start has been made here with the Town Hall, and in various other ways. As well as the Statement of Community Involvement and the Customer Liaison Panel, which tick certain boxes, there has been, at the request of the community groups, one meeting last Autumn between planning officers and representatives of the Hitchin groups to discuss the Local Plan – hopefully there will be more.

In the era of localism, would it not be good to think that these initiatives might lead to a greater openness and thus to further progress in working together?